

THE PLIGHT OF GISCARD D'ESTANG

By James O. Goldsborough

THE honeymoon was short and the marriage is on the rocks. Things simply have not worked out between France and her young President, "the French Kennedy," Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Unless the situation changes rapidly, the French will win the Western European sweepstakes on where the Communists finally win a solid share of power. Portugal took the early lead, only to be passed by Italy, which has now given way to the new front-runner, France.

It took only three years for the French to turn their backs on Giscard. Young, graceful, stimulating, he had the French dancing in the streets at his 1974 election to the presidency. The French had surprised themselves, that time. Finally, France had shown common sense, pulled back from the magnetism of the two extremes — the collectivism of the left and the nationalism of the right. Giscard had beaten the left's veteran campaigner, François Mitterrand. As for the right, the new President summed it up in a conversation: "The French are sick of Gaullism." "A new era begins," the headlines said.

A heady era, he promised; just give my programs a chance to catch on. His "center" would drive a wedge between the extremes. France would build an "advanced liberal society," a mixture of private enterprise and social justice. France would not fall into the British abyss, with nationalized companies foundering under a socialism that provided everything but the will to work.

Today, with the 1978 parliamentary elections six months away, Giscard is buffeted from side to side by a nation that seems out for his scalp. His cherished "center" is nowhere to be found. The ministers representing it have been discredited, disgraced and even exiled from Paris. Only Prime Minister Raymond Barre, who is visiting Washington this week to rally support for Giscard's faltering troops, retains some public appeal in a Government that otherwise is faceless and undistinguished.

It is the first American visit by a French Prime Minister since the beginning of the Gaullist era, and it is a measure of the trouble Giscard is in at home. The French Government is in bad need of bolstering, and though ordinarily you do not win votes in France by going to Washington, anything that Barre can get will help, be it public sympathy from President Carter on the Concorde or strong statements of solidarity on economic and energy problems by Secretaries Blumenthal and Schlesinger. The Barre visit was smoothed when Mitterrand, who had planned to visit Washington himself later this month, decided not to, in the absence of assurances that Carter would see him. The State Department had recommended against receiving the French Socialist chieftain: There was to be no doubt about which side the United States is on. Which is fine so long as your side goes on winning. But that may be the problem. France, in the process of rejecting the former suitor, has turned her affections to a new one. The audience sits amazed, for if the first young man seemed perfect, right down to his chin and the cut of his tweeds, the new one, for whom the girl seems stricken, has a darker image, a pencil-line mustache and a leer.

The left. The word alone rings of other times, of the 19th century, of bombs and beards, railroads and riots. Engels and Kautsky, Debs and the Haymarket. But the left in France has done what it has not done in any other country: It has patched itself together. Socialists, Communists, Radicals, all the main currents of the left, have composed their differences and signed a pact. It is as though the schism in the socialist movement caused in 1921 by the Russian Bolsheviks and their Comintern never happened. The left in France is united, for the first time, around a common program; and since the French are known to have their hearts, if not their pocketbooks, on the left, the left is set to run the young man out of town.

What has gone askew for Giscard? Everything had seemed so right. The idea had been to put a firm new hand on the helm of a meandering and divided nation, paralyzed by its eternal left-right split — "us" against "them," "moi ou le chaos." Gen. Charles de Gaulle had served well for a while, a historical giant to restore the dreams. Under Georges Pompidou, gruff and practical, France returned to earth, but by the time he died in 1974, Pompidou was a tired and sick man. Giscard represented the future, the new hope, the postwar man, the pedigreed egghead who would lead France into the industrial future, sell the Concorde, resist the Americans, catch the Germans, dazzle the European Community. Franco-German relations had suffered under Pompidou and Willy Brandt, two peasantry types steeped in suspicion. Giscard could handle the Germans, handle Helmut Schmidt. Together, these two ex-finance ministers would forge the new technocratic Europe, perhaps even convince decadent Britain it should follow along.

Giscard could do all this because, though born into wealth and privilege, he was not afraid to be a "traitor to his class," tax the rich, help the poor. He was not afraid to put down the Gaullists, attack traditions head on, pass abortion and divorce laws in a Catholic country, impose a capital-gains tax (the French will accept any kind of indirect sales tax but hate to have their incomes taxed). Giscard's answer to his critics was that they were old-fashioned. Wait and see, he said. The trouble with the French was that they weren't Anglo-Saxon enough.

"Changer la société" was the theme of the new reign. Changing France suggests changing Frenchmen, and Giscard might have done well to reflect on those who have made that attempt. The French Revolution cost 5,000 heads and resulted in a society 200 years later that has the most inequitable income distribution of any country in the West. The record of France's more modest reformers has been meager. The great utopians, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon and Rousseau, left little behind but their ideas. The most recent attempt was made in 1970-72 by Pompidou's first Prime Minister, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, who was dismissed for his pains.

As Pompidou, who did the dismissing, explained later to Alain Peyrefitte, the current Justice Minister and author of the best-selling book "Le Mal Français," "You can't pretend France is an Anglo-Saxon country; it isn't"; it would never have gone for Chaban-Delmas's "ridiculous fantasies." On reformism in general, Pompidou's views were

firm: "You think that the French have changed? They've changed their styles, perhaps, but not their mentality. They instinctively understand the dangers of change. That if you introduce one kind of change, it brings with it all kinds of secondary changes that weren't foreseen. The order of things is upset. Above all, the French are conservative. They have an instinct for conservation that I regard as healthy."

Strong tides for any reformer to buck, but Giscard was game for a try. France, he reasoned, had gone beyond the provincial analysis of a Pompidou; the problems of the 1970's were different; to solve them required evolution on several fronts.

Politically, it meant weakening the Communists and attracting the Socialists (at least some of them) to his side through popular reforms. It meant moving toward some version of the Anglo-American system — an alternative between the center-right and the center-left, with the President govern-

ing more or less successfully with either. Economically, it meant a sound franc, moderate inflation and increases in investment and exports — all relatively unusual for France. This, unfortunately, would also mean austerity and high unemployment, which, historically, have been fatal for French rulers, but Giscard thought that modern programs, job retraining and unemployment benefits would help. Diplomatically, Giscard followed a good-neighbor policy in Europe and sought to put France in the avant-garde in Western dealings with the third world. Equally important, he tried to end the eternal Gaullist quarrel with the United States over such things as NATO and the Common Market. He recognized that no understanding with West Germany was possible so long as France tried to force Bonn to choose between Washington and Paris.

Giscard, in short, had a modern, coherent, original vision for his country. To achieve it in a nation such as France, a President would have needed great charisma, sound lieutenants, boundless energy and practically subliminal powers of persuasion to get people to do what they don't want to do — forget their chauvinism, accept unemployment and become a moral leader of a group of poor countries they would rather forget.

A man like de Gaulle might have managed it. There are two main strains in the French — the egocentric and vain-glorious, which the Gaullists have exploited, and the idealistic and systematic, which is the stuff of the left. If you don't vibrate one of these two chords, as Giscard didn't, you are at a disadvantage, and you had better have a slick bag of tricks. For Giscard, that would have meant a series of tactical successes to prove that his vision was right and all the critics were wrong. Instead, he came under steady personal attack for his distant manners and desultory ways, his Governments careered from misfortune to misfortune in the most amateurish of fashions, and certain political facts refused to go away. High unemployment asserted its historic role as the undoer of French rulers. Unemployment

in France, seen as a day's work, not a day's dole. Income-tax reform did not come across as a social benefit, a means of ending the country's wide income differentials, because, in France, the poor as well as the rich hate the income tax.

Things began to go seriously wrong when Jacques Chirac, the *jeune loup* bent on resurrecting the Gaullism that many thought interred with Giscard's election, made his move in August 1976. It is no secret that Chirac plans to run for President when Giscard's term is up in 1981; by naming him Prime Minister three years ago, Giscard had hoped to keep him in line until then. In vain. Closely advised by two of Pompidou's former advisers, Pierre Juillet and Marie-France Garaud — mysterious, French-style *éminences grises* never seen in public — Chirac came to believe that Giscard's ineffectual reformism was exasperating the French to such a degree that they would vote the left into power. He urged Giscard to call early elections and run on a strong anti-Communist platform — that is, dramatize the very divisions Giscard had pledged to end. When the President refused, Chirac resigned and began organizing his Gaullists into a new "People's Rally," a name steeped in the nostalgia of de Gaulle's original French People's Rally of 1948-50. Chirac's new R.P.R., as it is called, while nominally antileft, is actually anti-Giscard. And the hard truth is that, without the Gaullists, Giscard is a general without troops.

Step by step, the Government played into Chirac's hands through a series of blunders. At the center of all of them was Giscard's own right-hand man, Michel Poniatowski, the Interior Minister, a rich, fat, titled Giscardian with a taste for irritating his Gaullist allies and a penchant for political error. Poniatowski had Abu Daoud, a Palestinian activist, arrested and held for extradition to West Germany, where he was wanted by the police in connection with the massacre of the Israeli Olympic team at Munich in 1972. But the German Government, reasoning that Palestinian terrorism had subsidized

lead to more Lufthansa hijackings, decided it didn't want him. The French, in the most humiliating circumstances, were forced to free him.

About the same time, another rich, fat, titled Giscardian, named Jean de Broglie, was murdered by the Paris underworld, with which he was apparently involved. Poniatowski, an associate of de Broglie, promptly declared the case solved — a clear case of obstruction of justice, for it wasn't, and still isn't.

The worst was yet to come. One of Giscard's earliest reforms had been to give the city of Paris autonomous status, with a mayor, removing the capital from its historic government tutelage. The decision, consistent with Giscard's notion of a modern, decentralized nation, was disastrous politically: As high rents shoved the workers to suburban apartments, Paris became a bourgeois Gaullist fief.

The consequences showed up in the nationwide municipal elections last March. Chirac entered the Paris mayoral race against Giscard's own candidate — another rich, titled (though only stout) Giscardian named Michel d'Ornano — and over the President's fervent pleas. This was the open split. Chirac ran an effective campaign against lackluster opposition, kissing babies, drinking red wine at cafe counters and promising safer and cleaner streets. He won Paris, as any Gaullist would have, but the left won sweeping victories in provincial cities and towns, reaching 53 percent of the vote. "This [governing] majority is doomed," pronounced Mitterrand. "All that is left for it is to decide the date of the [parliamentary] elections, when it will hand power over to us."

But it was more than blunders that led Giscard to his present pass — more, even, than the bad luck to have an economic recession, the worst since the 1930's, strike just as he became President. A more basic question has to do with the nature of his mandate. Chirac, the conservative, sees it as follows: "If the French had wanted change, they would have voted for Mitterrand. Giscard was elected to do nothing. His problem is not to have understood that." If, traditionally, the left and the right each commands 40 percent of the vote in any French election, it is the floating 20 percent that matters. Giscard went after that 20 percent with his reforms. Instead of winning it, he confused it — and a good part of his own 40 percent as well. "You cannot make politics that alienate your own clientele," says Mitterrand. "It is fatal."

And there was, from the outset, yet another, more fundamental problem. "Why doesn't Giscard like France?" an interviewer asked Pompidou shortly before his death. "It isn't that he doesn't like France," replied the gravel-voiced Auvergne schoolmaster, "it is that he thinks he is better than France. He doesn't think that France is up to his size and intelligence."

There ought to be a bond between the people and their leader in any democracy. The government, to be legitimate, must reflect the aspirations of the people. De Gaulle had captured that consensus and had lost it. Giscard's election had been followed by an outflow of enthusiasm. "Everything was possible for him in the beginning," says Peyrefitte. Today, nothing is possible. "The Government lacks legitimacy," says Chirac.

There is something in France that doesn't like Giscard's center, that sees it as a bloodless, neutral place to be. Like white, it is the absence of pigment. The French love their ideology, and even as they leave their farms for the industrial cities, there is something in them that wants to bring the old doctrines along. The Socialists and Communists have understood this, which helps explain why their position is so strong today.

The Socialists reek of musty Frenchness, a blend of tobacco and earth, cities and villages, ideas and roots. They range from crisp, technocratic minds like Michel Rocard, a kind of Giscard without pedigree, to the feisty bossism of Gaston Defferre in Marseilles; from the stump-worn sloganeering of Pierre Mauroy, Mayor of Lille in the north, to the brittle intellect of Mitterrand, a kind of Clemenceau of the left, steeped in history and literature, not sure whether he has been cast for the role of a Rastignac or a Julien Sorel or an Alexander Kerensky.

The Socialists' only match on the left are the Communists, who, under Georges Marchais, have been led away from the underworld of Stalinism to a new image of a brash, tough, totally French workers' party with a solid 20 percent of the vote. The Communists today rival the Gaullists in chauvinism. The word "internationalism" is never heard. Marx, if he returned today, would get the same treatment as Jesus in Dostoyevsky's tale of the Gypsies' rush.

Giscard, on the other hand, is flanked by both the left and the right to Hamlet — too vacillating, too conciliatory, too compromising, too leery of the kind of confrontation that the Gaullists and Communists relish. Chirac criticizes Giscard for wanting to be everybody's good neighbor. Where else but in France could wanting to be a good neighbor possibly give offense? Yet in France, such notions are considered a sign of weakness. To get along with people is a sign of giving in, if not selling out. One either shuns others or dominates them.

Even so, there is something inherently crazy about the French going left. How can a nation with 348 kinds of cheese be collectivized? What people is more conservative, more individualistic, more ungovernable? Yet the left has made a spectacular comeback, perhaps because the French are a nation of paradoxes, unsynthesizable — and they love it.

The left... Rendered all but extinct by Gaullism, internal divisions and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, held down to only 25 percent of the vote when Pompidou was swept into the Presidency in 1969, the left today is the dominant force in French politics, with a 12 percent lead in the polls. It still may not come to power, for the French often find reasons for voting right in spite of how they feel about it in their hearts, but it is in better shape to do so than at any time in the past.

France has approached a watershed, and it may well be the same for the other nations of Latin Europe. No longer can majority coalitions, whether calling themselves conservatives, centrists, national movements or Christian Democrats, hang on to power, despite incompetence and corruption, simply by invoking the Red menace. They must prove that they have the better policies and cleaner hands; that they can solve the problems. For 40 years, France has not known what it is to have a normal, democratic alternation in power — majorities replaced by oppositions; Italy, Spain and Portugal haven't known it for even longer periods. The experience altogether. But times are changing, and the Communist parties, in large part, are

The French Communist Party, for example, came out in support of direct elections to the European Parliament, espoused the *force de frappe*, backed the concepts of Eurocommunism and stepped up its criticism of the Soviet Union. Just as each of these steps has made life with the French Socialists — and the alliance between the two parties — more credible, so it has made the Communist Party's relations with the Soviet Union more difficult. With those four decisions, the party showed that it had finally accepted the European Community, that it was nationalist in matters of defense, that it no longer conceived of Communism in France as resembling the Russian model, and that it was no longer unconditionally pro-Soviet. Cynics still dismiss change and strife among the Communists as cosmetic in nature, but it seems undeniable that the Communist parties of Western Europe are not on good terms with Moscow, and that part of their success derives from this.

Both the Communists and the Socialists are being crafty in this pre-electoral period. They may peck away at each other to show that they are rivals as well as allies, but they avoid the bitter personal attacks exchanged by the Gaullists and the Giscardian centrists. Each of the two leftist parties wants to come out ahead; each knows that its real troubles will begin afterward.

With its sweeping nationalizations, workers' control, trade protectionism and price freeze, enough is known of the left's Common Program of Government. It would be unprecedented in France. The Popular Front of 1936, which ended in failure, is not comparable: The front had no common program, nor did the Communists participate in the front Governments. There were Communists in the post-war Governments of 1944-47, prior to the outbreak of the cold war, but they held only minor posts in coalitions representing all major French

parties, not just the left. The likely consequences of a leftist assumption of power today can be easily imagined. Some of them, like a flight of capital, a drop in investments and a collapse on the Paris Bourse, are already under way. But there would be more — a falling franc, import barriers, difficulties in the Common Market and the Atlantic Alliance, and much business failure. Some lessons can be learned from the severe economic dislocation that occurred in Portugal, though admittedly Portugal, a nonindustrial country, cannot be the perfect example.

The French Socialists dismiss most of these fears as exaggerated and ill-intentioned. They claim that they have thought of everything — that they will control the Communists' excesses, that there will be an initial period of difficult transition, and that an economic takeoff will follow. Above all, they try to calm the fears of the United States. They are making repeated trips to Washington these days with the same message: Don't worry, and, above all, don't interfere. France is not Chile. The French people would not tolerate American interference in their democratic processes.

Though things certainly would not go as smoothly as the Socialists like to think, there is no reason to believe that utter chaos would follow a victory by the left. It is unlikely that the Communists, who have waited so long to come out of their ghetto and try their hand at government, would destroy it all through impossible demands. The party does not want to be pushed back 20 years by a strong rightist reaction under Jacques Chirac.

A leftist victory next March would expose the hole in the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, tailored in 1958 for the majestic figure of General de Gaulle. The opposition never came close to winning during the de Gaulle-Pompidou years, and so the Constitution

has never been tested by having a President of one ideology and a Prime Minister and Cabinet of another. Even with Mitterrand as Prime Minister of a Government of Socialists and Communists, Giscard, under constitutional provisions, would still serve out the rest of his term, with the considerable powers his office enjoys. He says he will not resign but stay on hand for another three years to try to restrain the left. In practice, however, he would be quickly transformed into a lame duck. He would have several weapons at his disposal if the going got rough, including dissolution of Parliament, but what would there be to keep the French from deciding that he hadn't given the left a chance and voting it right back in? If that happened, or if Giscard, against expectations, chose to resign, it would mark the end of the Fifth Republic and a return to government by Parliament, the symbol of the Third and Fourth Republics, going back to 1870.

It is probably only fair that a nation that turns aside from the traditional way and is unwilling to try a middle way should take on something completely new. The French have done that in the past, and their history, unlike that of Britain, has been one of abrupt shocks and great exuberance, followed by a return to the natural order of things. They seem to need periods of collective catharsis, which accomplish little from a historical point of view but feel so good. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing doesn't need the catharsis, doesn't like the shocks and doesn't understand the need. A foreigner may sympathize with him and shake his head at the French. But, as Georges Pompidou pointed out, they are not Anglo-Saxons. ■

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